

On the Interpretation of Pothos in a Mosaic from the Antiquities Market with the Representation of Pelops and Hippodameia

Antika Müzayedesinden Pelops ve Hippodameia Betimli Bir Mozaikteki Pothos'un Yorumlanması Üzerine

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a representation of Pothos in a mosaic auctioned in the antiquities market, –from a private collection after being acquired at Asfar Brothers, Beirut, in the late 60's. –, today in J. Bagot Archaeology-Ancient Art in Barcelona. More specifically, we will discuss, its interpretation within a scene related to Pelops and Hippodameia. Even the three characters are represented, with an unusual iconography, their identification is undoubtedly established on the base of inscriptions in Greek. To proceed with this discussion, this study analyzes the ancient literary sources and the images of Pothos depicted in the other mosaics, among others, on a mosaic of Pelops and Hippodameia from London antique market in 1979, that had been part of a private collection of California until the 1990s, being auctioned at Christie's in New York on 2010, and in the mosaic of the Weddings of Dionysus and Ariadne from Philippiopolis.

In connection with the references of some literary sources, the representations of these two mosaics are very revealing to understand the mosaic scene currently conserved in J. Bagot.

Keywords: Pothos, Pelops, Hippodameia, mosaic, antiquities market.

Öz

Bu makale, 60'ların sonunda Beyrut'tan Asfar Kardeşler (Asfar Brothers) özel koleksiyonunda yer alan, günümüzde ise Barselona'daki J. Bagot Arkeoloji ve Antik Sanat'ta bulunan, antika müzayedesinden bir mozaikteki Pothos betimini ele almaktadır. Özellikle de, Pelops ve Hippodameia ile ilgili bir sahnede Pothos'un yorumlanması tartışılacaktır. Üç karakterin de sıra dışı bir ikonografi ile betimlenmesine rağmen, karakterlerin teşhisi hiç kuşkusuz, Yunanca yazıtlara dayanılarak yapılmıştır. Bu tartışmaya devam etmek için, bu çalışmada, antik yazılı kaynakların yanı sıra başka mozaiklerde betimlenen Pothos tasvirleri de ele alınacaktır. Ele alınacak mozaikler arasında 1979'da Londra Antika Müzayedesi'nde yer alan, 1990'lara kadar Kaliforniya'da özel bir koleksiyonun parçası olan ve 2010'da New York'ta Christie's'te açık artırmaya çıkarılan Pelops ve Hippodameia betimli bir mozaik ve Philippiopolis'ten Dionysos ve Ariadne'nin evlenmesi sahnesinin görüldüğü bir mozaik de yer almaktadır.

Günümüzde J. Bagot Arkeoloji ve Antik Sanat'ta korunan mozaik üzerindeki sahneyi anlayabilmek için bazı yazılı kaynaklardan alınacak referanslar ve bu iki mozaikteki tasvirleri yorumlamak gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pothos, Pelops, Hippodameia, mozaik, antika müzayedesi.

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The mosaic studied in this paper is curated in the J. Bagot. Archaeology-Ancient Art Antiquities House in Barcelona, in whose website appears documented precedent a private collection after being acquired, in the late 60's, from Asfar Brothers, Beirut. In the image, the winged and naked *eros*, that is identified by an inscription with its Greek name -ΠΟΘΟΣ-, is holding in his left hand over his shoulder a flaming torch, while turning his head towards the main characters of the scene, *Hippodameia* and *Pelops*, also identified by its names in inscriptions, and draws their attention with the right hand extended towards an architectural structure, perhaps an access to a building, on the right side of the picture (Fig. 1). The presence of *Pothos* in the representation of this love myth, whose union was achieved after several vicissitudes, has been recently explained as indicative of negative repercussions and impacts, alluding to the death of *Oinomaus* and the curses of Mirtilo on the descendants of the couple (Valero 2016: 157 fig. 10), although no literary source echoes the symbolism of *Pothos* as personification of a love whose consummation causes destruction.

Figure 1
Mosaic of Pelops and Hippodameia.
Photo: According Bayot.



It should be remembered that the appearance of *Pothos* in a depiction, although very different, of the myth of *Pelops* and *Hippodameia* is documented in a red-figures vase from Apulia, dating from 360 BC, with Aphrodite, where both, identified by inscriptions like the rest of the personages, have been included in the scene of the *Pelops*' arrival before *Oinomaos* in presence of *Hippodameia* (Pipili 1990: 436 núm.4). It is not surprising, considering that *Pothos* (Bazant 1994: "Pothos" I) is mentioned as the son of Aphrodite and a member of his entourage by Aeschylus (Suppl 1035-1037), although it was Sophocles (Trach. 631 -632), the first author who described him as a personification of love for an absent person, a line followed by Plato in his *Cratylus* (400d & 419e-420b), who clarified the meaning of some *erotes*, which, uniquely identified with a name, are represented in Greek vase painting¹:

*"[Of the Loves:] ...The name μεροσ
(longing) was given to the stream (ρουσ) which
most draws the soul; for because it flows with
a rush (ιμενους) and with a desire for things and
thus draws the soul on through the impulse of
its flowing, all this power gives it the name of μεροσ.
And the word ποθος (yearning) signifies that it
pertains not to that which is present, but to that
which is elsewhere (αλλοθι που) or absent, and there-
fore the same feeling which is called μεροσ when its
object is present, is called ποθος when it is absent."*

The significance given by Sophocles and Plato on *Pothos*, as the personification of the loving desire of a person who, being absent, cannot be satisfied, causing pain, suffering and longing according to Pliny (Plin.nat. 33: 4.7), would explain the inclusion of *Pothos* with Aphrodite, while *Hippodameia* experienced the loving desire of each young suitor, and then the frustration at the attitude of her father, who would have made her a longing for the missing before *Pelops*'s arrival.

However, it seems opportune to revise *Pothos*'s other representations in mosaics and their context in the framework of different mythological episodes. *Pothos* attracted my interest while investigating the parallels of the scene of Selene and Endymion in a pavement from *Castulo*, in particular the representation in an unpublished mosaic (Neira 2015: 69-72 fig. 4), with provenance, context and location unfortunately unknown. This mosaic (Fig. 2) had appeared on the London antiquities market in 1979 and had been part of a private collection from California until the 1990s, being auctioned at Christie's in New York on June 10, 2010, according to the brief information of the catalog, which also provides the measurements - 167.6 cm x 177.8 cm - and a dating from the third century AD.

Keeping in mind that in the figurative picture, in spite of its characteristic iconography, two inscriptions in Greek with the names of ΕΝΔΨΜΙΩΝ and ΣΕΛΗΝΗ identified the young sleeping and the beautiful Selene, with its characteristic crescent moon, in a *biga*, with only the edge of the curved box and an eight-spoke wheel driven by two bulls advancing toward the right, well

1 www.theoi.com/Ouranos/ErosPothos.html.

documented in other images of Selene (Gury 1994: nr. 58-66). In a tough position, with bent knees, the goddess seems to be represented descending the chariot, although it is not well appreciated if she has done so or is standing on the ground, but instead of focusing on Endymion, Selene moves her eyes and a flaming torch (Gury 1994: nr. 58, 61, 66) towards to a naked winged *eros*, located in the upper right part of the image, whose index aims to draw attention of the goddess to the young sleeping. It would not be surprising, if we take into account the comparable presence of an *eros* in the Isola Sacra mosaic (Gabelmann 1986: nr. 29), in Nîmes mosaic (Gabelmann 1986: nr. 5), and in several scenes documented, among others, in paintings and sarcophagi (Gabelmann 1986: nr. 52-54, 58, 61, 63, 64, 67, 69-70, 73, 77-78, 81, 83, 85, 92, 93, 94), except that this *eros* is identified as the main character by an inscription in Greek with the name of ΠΟΘΟΣ.

Evidently in the mosaic of Christie's auction, *Pothos* points with his finger to the sleeping Endymion who, given his everlasting deep sleep and in spite of

Figure 2
Mosaic of Selene and Endymion.
Photo: According Christie's.



the loving desires of the goddess, makes impossible the carnal union, causing in Selene the yearning, longing and pain by an "absent" love, as has been pointed out by several of the aforementioned ancient authors².

In studying the representation of *Pothos* in the mosaic of Christie's auction, we highlight the figure of another *eros*, also identified by an inscription in Greek with the name of ΠΟΘΟΣ, in the mosaic of the Weddings of Dionysus and Ariadne from *Philippopolis* (Neira 2015: 71-72 fig. 5), dating from the second quarter of the fourth century AD, preserved in the Shahba Museum (Balty 1977: 50-56) (Fig. 3). But here, instead of personifying love for the absent, as sleeping and unconscious and unable to correspond, and therefore longing and suffering pain, *Pothos* stands between the couple, carrying a flaming torch that usually symbolizes the *hymeneo*, the amorous union, according to the narrative of the myth about nuptials, which led us to ask the meaning of *Pothos*'s incorporation into this scene (Neira 2015: 71 fig. 5). It could be argued that the mention given by Euripides, who in his *Hippolytus* (525-526) refers to *Pothos* as the son of *Eros*, while in another of his works (Bacch. 414) places him in the kingdom of Dionysus.

Figure 3
Mosaic of the Weddings of Dionysus and
Ariadne from Philippopolis.
Photo: Luz Neira.



The most revealing reference, however, is found in a passage by Nonnos (Nonn. Dion. XLVII, 442, 15), when the author from Panopolis, referring to the marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne, mentions that the previous experience of love desired and not achieved with Theseus plunged Ariadne into great pain, but it was this unfulfilled love, Pothos, which finally made possible the union with Dionysus:

[Dionysos addresses his future bride Ariadne:]

"Not for nothing did that fleet [of Theseus] sail

*from my Naxos [abandoning Ariadne on the island], but Pothos (Sexual Longing) preserved you for a nobler bridal."*³

² Except in Propertius (Prop. II, 15, 13-24), where explicitly stated otherwise: "Paris himself is said to have burned at the sight of Helen naked, when she rose from the bed of Menelaus; and it was naked that Endymion enraptured Phoebus's sister and naked, they say, lay with the goddess."

³ In another passage Nonno (Nonn. Dion. 25, 150, 31, 103) states that Pothos is a son of Zephyrus and

In this sense, in the mosaic of Bagot, *Pothos* could be representing Hippodameia's longing for love towards each of the many pretenders successively eliminated by her father, making her to fear that she could not fulfill her dream of marriage, but, as in the Syrian mosaic from *Philippopolis*, it would be this previous experience - of love longed for and not finally achieved by *Pothos* - which, in the line of Nonnos on Ariadne, would finally make possible its union with Pelops. For this reason, it is *Pothos*, still with the flaming torch on his shoulder, who points to the building where the famous race must be decided, indicating the way to reach that union, while the young *Hippodameia*, quietly seated but animated by the intervention of *Pothos*, raised the palm for the victors before the presence of *Pelops*, indicating the action that the young pretender should perform to achieve his love, the feat of triumph over *Oinomaos* in the race of chariots.

Iris; while, in contrast, later on (Nonn.Dion. 33, 112): "[Aglaia calls upon Eros to assist his mother Aphrodite:] 'Allvanquisher unvanquished, preserver of life coeval with the universe, make haste! Kythereia [Aphrodite] is in distress. None of her attendants has remained with her; Kharis (Charis, Grace) has gone, Peitho (Seduction) has vanished, Pothos (Sexual Longing) the inconstant has left her; she had none to send but me. She needs your invincible quiver!'"

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